Thinking About the Reading/Writing Connection with P. David Pearson

At this year's National Writing Project Spring Meeting, to be held April 11–12 in Washington, D.C., the Friday program includes speaker P. David Pearson. Pearson, former co-director of the Center for the Improvement of Early Reading Achievement and now dean of the University of California, Berkeley, Graduate School of Education, will speak about programs that have helped schools beat the odds.

Last year, Pearson, an expert on early literacy, was interviewed about the reading/writing connection for the upcoming National Writing Project book *Because Writing Matters: A Guide to Building Writing Programs in the Schools.* The book, written by Carl Nagin and scheduled to be released this spring, makes a case for why writing is important to learning at all grade levels and in all subject areas, and encourages principals and district adminstrators to build successful writing programs in their own schools. Here is what Pearson had to say about the "synergy" of reading and writing skills.

Though writing has a central role in early reading development, this understanding is almost diametrically opposed to how writing was viewed when I first came into the field in the middle to late 60s, when linguistic readers explicitly forbade or discouraged the teaching of writing until reading was under control on the grounds that presenting the child with two tasks would be too much. But, ironically, as we enter this new century, we've come to understand just how central a role writing, in all of its manifestations, has in the development of early reading. Increasingly, we see the synergistic relationship between learning to write and learning to read.

At the most rudimentary level, when kids are encouraged to write—even at the very early age, pre-kindergarten and kindergarten—and they're encouraged to spell words as they sound them, two things happen. The first is that they develop phonemic awareness in precisely the way that the advocates of direct phonemic instruction intend for it to be learned and tested. But with writing, they do it, I would argue, in a much more incidental, less laborious, and more natural way. And it's acquired in the service of some other functional task, i.e., trying to communicate something with someone.

A second synergy is that there's actually some payoff in terms of the letter-sound knowledge, even though we all know that when you're writing and trying to spell things the way they sound, you're not going from letter to sound, you're going from the sound to letter. But there's enough of an overlap between these two correspondences that transfer occurs. Phonics is so much more transparent in spelling than it is in reading that I think it's easier for kids to deal with.

The other kinds of synergy that are not quite so obvious are more structural and conceptual. For example, when you engage kids in writing stories, there's a natural hook-up to those they read. This may be an instance where the writing helps kids. Because it's surely the case that kids use the stories they read as models for their writing. But it also works back the other way. Because the minute I now use my story frame that I may have gathered from the stories you've read to me and with me, I now use that structural idea in writing in a more vivid way.

Writing makes things concrete and puts it out there for inspection in a way that reading doesn't. And when I have to deal with "once upon a time" and "they lived happily ever after" in writing, it hits me in the face more than in reading.

Another way to look at this is that when you're writing, it slows things down so you can examine them. We've discovered this in some of our work with [English language learners.] It makes language available for examination in ways that oral language doesn't. If I want to examine something carefully, then having it

see Spring Meeting Speaker, page 9

Sign-up Online for the NWP Spring Meeting

Planning to attend the National Writing Project Spring Meeting in Washington, D.C., this April? Make your life easy . . . register online! You can also get an overview of the meeting, check out the agenda, read about special activities, and even make a hotel reservation—all from the comfort of the chair in front of your computer screen.

Go to www.writingproject.org, highlight the 2002 NWP Spring Meeting icon at the left of the screen, and follow the simple steps to find all sorts of interesting pre-meeting information. Need help? Call the National Writing Project offices at 510/642-0963 or email ychiu@writingproject.org

Spring Meeting Speaker

continued from page 6

available in print makes it easier. And when I write, that examination is made more concrete than when I read.

The strategies that are part of learning to write—such as peer editing and author's chair—also help kids learn to read. Because when I do a peer editing, I'm asking questions like, "Okay, what was it you really wanted to say?"; and now, "How well did you say it?"; and then, "How could I help you say it better?" And these are exactly the kind of questions we are trying to promote in critical reading: getting to the author, trying to understand the author's intentions and motives. Why in heaven's name would someone say this? And why would they say it in the way they did? So, for me, when you engage kids in this kind of peer editing, you're engaging [them] in the first steps of critical reading. That's another one of those important synergies that isn't often talked about.

Another obvious synergy is that the texts that we write in a classroom are potentially texts for you and me and our peers to read to one another. That's a wonderful kind of expectation to promote in classrooms: What we write is written to be read. They're not written to satisfy my assignments as a teacher. It implies that the criterion of authenticity is going to be important inside classrooms. And by authenticity I mean purpose—that it's written to be read by a real person other than a teacher.

So these are synergies that link learning to read and learning to write: the first at a letter-sound level; the second at a structural level; and the third one less structural and more about the pragmatics of language intention and purpose and your relation to an audience.

Because of this link, if I were asked to offer advice on building a reading/language arts program for grade one or even kindergarten, I would have a writing time every day. It might be 10 or 15 minutes to start with. You would be composing texts—some on your own, some with buddies, and some with a group. I would use a combination of individual texts, small-group texts, and the more conventional language experience stories—all those, to me, should be part of a reading-writing program.

Where's the "Legislative Update"?

For the lastest information about NWP's work with legislators in Washington, D.C., go to *www.writingproject.org/Resources/dc.html.* Look for the regular "Legislative Update" column to return with the next issue of *The Voice.*